DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 230 977 CS 207 719

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TITLE Persuasive Writing at Grades 5, 7, and 11: A Cognitive-Developmental Perspective.
PUB DATE Apr 83
NOTE 25p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Montreal, Canada, April 11-15, 1983).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cognitive Development; Developmental Stages; Elementary Secondary Education; Expository Writing; Grade 5; Grade 7; Grade 11; Literary Devices; *Narration; *Persuasive Discourse; *Writing (Composition); Writing Instruction; Writing Processes; *Writing Research; *Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS Discourse Modes

ABSTRACT

To explore student facility with argumentative writing, 40 persuasive essays of 5th, 7th, and 11th grade students were analyzed for their relative percentage of reporting (narrating), interpreting, generalizing, and speculative sentences. Fifth and seventh graders were found to use significantly more narrative and fewer generalizations than older students. The young writers' reliance on reporting may be due to inexperience with the argumentative mode or a tendancy to model writing on their experience of reality. Thus, they are more skillful with the chronological organization of narrative and less expert with a mode that fails to supply the audience response found in oral argument. That reporting may represent a flight from the heavier cognitive demands of persuasive writing is suggested in studies showing mature second language learners relying more on narrative when writing in a foreign language than when using their own. While supporting earlier research that younger students write less, and less effectivly, in the argumentative mode, this study does not indicate that children cannot write persuasively. In fact, the large amount of argumentative writing demanded in high school and college suggests that students should be taught to write as effectively in this as in other modes. (Excerpts from student essays are appended.) (MM)

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Persuasive Writing at Grades 5, 7, and 11:

A Cognitive-Developmental Perspective

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Researchers Association, Montreal, April, 1983

CS 207 719

Persuasive Writing at Grades 5, 7, and 11

There are both theoretical and practical grounds for believing that persuasive writing is difficult for young students. Two theoretical explanations bearing upon the difficulties which young students have in writing persuasive pieces are those of Moffett (1968) and of Bereiter and Scardamalia (1982). The first explanation is cognitive-developmental. The second is based on a theory of discourse schemata.

Moffett describes discourse as an abstractive hierarchy beginning, at the lowest level, with narrative, followed by generalizing and theorizing. Narrative, the form of discourse that most closely resembles the chronological structure of external reality is, he believes, the easiest and most natural form of discourse for children. The higher abstractive levels of generalizing and theorizing become common only as cognitive development takes place.

Bereiter and Scardamalia (1982) hypothesize that children's difficulty in writing persuasive compositions is related to the development of discourse schemata. They suggest that when children write, they must adapt their existing oral discourse schemata for the purposes of written discourse. Discourse schemata which are relatively closed in that they impose fairly strict requirements on the composer (e.g., narrative) will be

easier to adapt than will schemata such as explanation or argument which are comparatively more open. This theory provides an explanation of the fact that children write narratives somewhat more easily than they do persuasion.

At a practical level, several strands of evidence attest to the fact that writing arguments is more difficult for young students than writing narratives. In the first place, students do not appear to perform well, qualitatively, when they write persuasive compositions. Hidi and Hildyard (1981) found that most of their fifth-grade subjects could produce good narratives but that only a few could produce good "opinion essays". In the second National Assessment of Writing in the United States, for example, only one in three thirteen-year-olds produced a competent pesuasive paper (Brown, 1981).

Secondly, students in a variety of grades from three to twelve have been found to write less when writing persuasive pieces than when writing narrative (Crowhurst, 1977, 1980; Fowler & Glynn, 1983; Hidi and Hilyard, 1981).

In the third place, it appears to be difficult for young children to write "in mode" when they are asked to write a persuasive piece. Crowhurst (1977) found that seventeen out of forty sixth-graders, when asked to write six persuasive compositions, wrote narratives on two or more occasions out of the six. A similar finding is reported by Wilkinson, Barnsley, Hanna, & Swan (1980) who describe arguments by ten-year-olds that

oscillate between stating opinions and lapsing into narrative anecdote. Similar findings are reported by Gunderson (1981) and Fowler (personal conversation).

Expository and argumentative writing are the major types of writing required in high school and college. These kinds of writing are commonly held to be the goal towards which the development of writing skill aims. In a major study of writing in British high schools, Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod, & Rosen, 1975) reported that transactional writing (i.e., the writing of planning, reporting, instructing, informing, advising, persuading, arguing, and theorising) constituted the major part of high school writing, increasing from 54% in the first year of high school to 84% in the last year. College entrance examinations (e.g., those set by the College Entrance Examination Board in the United States; the English Placement Test set annually by the Educational Research Institute of British Columbia) place overwhelming emphasis on these kinds of writing. Despite the emphasis placed on expository and argumentative writing, and the fact that educators frequently complain about students' poor ability in these modes of writing, few studies have attempted to describe how skill in these modes develops.

Wilkinson et al. (1980) collected persuasive compositions on one topic from students aged 7+, 10+, and 13+ (a total of "about 100" across the three age levels), and devised a scoring system, based on Moffett (1968), which they claim allowed them to

describe cognitive developmental differences reflected in written compositions. They describe their first two categories, describing and interpreting, as "concrete operational", and their second two, generalizing, and speculating, as "moving towards 'formal operational' language use" (p.65). They report that 13-year-olds made more generalizations than 10-year-olds, and that 10-year-olds made more generalizations than 7-year-olds. Their report is anecdotal and descriptive and makes no reference to quantification or statistical analysis.

The purpose of the present study was to quantify differences in persuasive writing between Grades 5, 7, and 11 using an adaptation of the scoring code used by Wilkinson et al. It was of particular interest to examine the tendency, noted earlier by Crowhurst (1977) and Wilkinson et al. (1980), for young writers either to write entirely out of mode or to slip in and out of mode when responding to an assignment that required argumentative writing.

Method

Subjects: Subjects were from one high school and five elementary schools in Richmond, British Columbia, a municipality in the Greater Vancouver area. Forty subjects were randomly selected from 105 fifth-grade students in five fifth-grade classes, 117 seventh-grade students in five seventh-grade classes, and 87 eleventh-grade students in six eleventh-grade classes. The sample from which subjects were selected

represented a full range of abilities at each grade level.

Assignment: A common assignment was administered in all classes by means of a colored slide and a printed assignment sheet. The slide showed a classroom scene with a misbehaving boy. The writer was asked to imagine that he/she was a member of a class committee which was responsible for recommending punishments for students who broke classroom rules. The task was to decide on an appropriate punishment and to "persuade your teacher that your opinion is right." They were asked to try to write about a page. Students were allowed forty minutes one day for a rough draft and forty minutes four days later to revise and rewrite.

Scoring and Scorers: In general, the unit of analysis was the sentence. In a small number of cases, a sentence was divided into more than one unit when a subject--usually a fifth-grader--co-ordinated principal clauses which were dissimilar in structure and which should have been two separate sentences. Sentences 1 and 2 below are examples of sentences which were thus divided, divisions being indicated by a double slash (//). Sentence 3, however, was scored as a single unit.

1. This way the boy will have to be more careful on what he does in class//and it will also give him a sore hand.
2. I think I am right because you have to teach the boy how to get the an answer//and if he still does not get it make him figure it out.

3. Make the boy do his work after school and phone his parents and tell them that he is not paying attention in school.

Each sentence was assigned to one of the following sentence-types.

1. Reporting: describes chronological, narrative sequences, or makes simple, concrete statements about the here and now; reports on what happened or what is happening. (e.g., "Today in our class, Bill Johnson was fooling around. First he was playing some jokes on our substitute. Then he was throwing and shooting paper clips at people.")

2. Interpreting: explains what should be done, or how or why, or expresses an opinion (e.g., "I think that he should write a five page essay on why not to shoot elastics at people." "The essay would teach him a lesson." "The punishment is not so severe as many of the other penalties.") Always refers to the specific situation--e.g., what should be done to this boy.

3. Generalizing: generalized reasons or opinions (e.g., "The punishment should somehow correspond to the crime in order for it to have an effect on the student." "A person that substitutes in the absence of the permanent teacher should be respected." "I think that the punishment for a student breaking the rules should be dealt with according to how severe a rule he has broken.") Refers to generalized situations and general principles rather than the specific situation.

Speculating: hypothesizes about possible consequences (e.g., "Remembering his last task might persuade him to think twice before he acts." "Also, I feel that if we make an example of him it may discourage others others from performing the same or similar actions in the future.")

The context of a sentence as well as its form was taken into account when judging the type to which it should be assigned. In the excerpt below, for example, the sentences following the first sentence read like narrative which would be classified as type 1 if it were judged by form alone. However, these sentences are clearly intended as an explanation for the judgment that "the event . . . must be treated as a very serious matter", and are therefore classified as category 2, interpreting.

> The event that happened yesterday must be treated as a very serious matter. While the substitute was trying to instruct us in the lesson, Rob very rudely threw a spit ball at the substitute and hit her on the nose. The whole class roared with laughter and by the end of the period, the class hadn't yet calmed down. The poor substitute, red-faced with embarrassment, found it very hard to keep her cool.

Scoring was done by two scorers. After training, percentage agreement, calculated on the basis of scoring thirty-nine compositions (thirteen selected at random from each grade) was 92. Disagreements were resolved by discussion between the two scorers.

Method of Analysis: In each composition, the number of sentences in each of the four categories was expressed as a proportion of the total number of sentences. In order to take into account the fact that they were not independent, the four scores were treated as repeated measures. Scores were analyzed by an ANOVA (using BMDP2V) in a 3(grade) by 4(sentence-type) design with a repeated measure on the sentence-type.

Results

Sentence-type exerted a significant main effect, $F(3,351)=182.22$, $p < .01$. There was a significant interaction between grade and sentence-type, $F(6,351)=2.96$, $p < .01$. Bonferroni t statistics were used to make planned pairwise comparisons of means in grade by sentence-type cells. The results showed that there were significant contrasts between Grade 11 and Grade 5, and between Grade 11 and Grade 7 on sentence-type 1, reporting. Grade 11 students used significantly fewer sentences of this type than students in Grade 5 and students in Grade 7.

Sentences of the reporting type in this particular assignment signaled writing out-of-mode either by writing narrative, or by reporting on "what is happening now". Eleven fifth graders and twelve seventh graders wrote all or most of their compositions in the narrative mode whereas only two eleventh graders did so. No eleventh grader answered the assignment by writing entirely in the narrative mode, whereas

seven fifth graders and four seventh graders did so. In addition to those students who wrote all, or the major part, of their compositions in the narrative mode, a few others (one at Grade 5, four at Grade 7, and two at Grade 11) wrote a small number of sentences which were classified as narrative, i.e., reporting.

The twenty-eight fifth and seventh graders who used narrative to a greater or lesser extent when responding to this assignment exhibited several distinct, identifiable patterns of compositions. As indicated above, some wrote entirely on narrative whereas others did so only partially. Of those compositions which were written entirely in the narrative mode, there were two different kinds:

a. Narratives which told the events of the day. For examples, see 1 and 2 in Table 1.

b. Narratives in which the major part of the content was a dialogue recounting a disagreement between teacher and student. (See examples 3 and 4 in Table 1.) Instead of writing in the argumentative mode, the students who wrote these compositions presented the argument in the form of reported conversation.

Others wrote only partially in the narrative mode. Sometimes, the persuasive part of the composition came after a substantial narrative introduction as in example 2 in Table 2. Sometimes, the persuasive part was "encased" in narrative, as in example 1 in Table 2. Others who wrote partially in narration, began the composition as a persuasive piece but "fell out of

mode", as it were, apparently unable to sustain that kind of writing. Examples 3 and 4 in Table 2 illustrate this kind of composition.

Differences between grades for sentence-types 2, 3 and 4, i.e., interpreting, generalizing, and speculating, were not significant. However, eleventh graders used noticeably more generalizing sentences than fifth and seventh graders. Eleventh graders were much more apt to give generalized reasons for punisments than were younger students who used this category scarcely at all.

The general profiles on the use of the four sentence types were similar for all three grades. (See Figure 1.) All three grades used sentence-type 2, interpreting, to a much greater extent than any other category. This was predictable. Since the assignment called on students to persuade their teacher that a certain line should be taken in punishing a misbehaving boy, it was to be expected that students would write many sentences explaining what should be done to him and why. Sentence-type 4, speculating, was used scarcely at all. As will be noted from Figure 1, scores for fifth and seventh graders were almost identical for all four sentence-types.

Discussion

Various possible explanations present themselves for the differences between twelfth graders' and fifth and seventh graders' persuasive compositions, and particularly for the

tendency of the younger students to write either partially or completely in the narrative mode. A contributing factor may well have been simple lack of familiarity with the persuasive mode. Teachers' comments indicate that elementary students do not write much argumentation. Moreover, this kind of writing does not often appear in reading material presented to elementary children. It is possible that students simply fell into a well practiced mode, namely, narration.

Bereiter and Scardamalia (1982) hypothesize that children write better and more easily in narration not merely because they get more practice writing in this mode, but because, in order to write, they must adapt existing oral discourse schemata for the purposes of written discourse and because open schemata like those for exposition and argument are more difficult to adapt than closed schemata like the schema for narrative. They suggest that what children produce in composition is a conversational turn. The short compositions produced by young students in argument or discussion are just about what one would expect as a turn in an oral argument or discussion. However, in conversation, after a turn, it becomes someone else's turn to respond. Children, they hypothesize, find it difficult to sustain persuasive writing without the oral responses which provide the impetus for the next "turn".

Many of the arguments written by the younger students in the present study resembled the short, turn-like arguments described

by Bereiter and Scardamalia. Sometimes these short arguments stood alone as the complete composition. Sometimes the short argument was embedded in a narrative (e.g., see #'s 1 and 2 in Table 1), or presented after a narrative introduction (e.g., see #'s 1, 2 and 3 in Table 2). The compositions which were a mixture of argument and narration may have been an attempt to fulfil the request to write a page, when all they had to say in the argumentative mode was the equivalent of a short conversational turn.

The compositions in the form of a dialogue are of special interest. They appear to represent an intermediate step between oral conversation and written argumentation. One dialogue composition written by a seventh grader lends particular support to this hypothesis. The student wrote her first draft as a narrative with large chunks of dialogue. When she revised, as requested, on the second day, she changed mode and wrote entirely in argumentation. Both first and final versions are presented in Table 3. Though at first reading it appears that, on Day 2, she composed an entirely new composition, a closer reading reveals that the final draft is derived from the first. It seems that the cognitive demands of writing in the persuasive mode caused this writer to write first in the easier narrative form, but that once she had generated content in this manner, she was free to turn to the business of transforming it into the less familiar and, putatively, more difficult mode of argumentation, the mode

required by the assignment. The dialogue compositions, then, may be interpreted as support for Bereiter and Scardamalia's hypothesis that written argument is derived from the schema for oral argument.

The narrative and dialogue compositions may also be interpreted as a flight, by the younger students, from the heavier cognitive demands of writing in the persuasive mode. Support for this explanation is drawn from studies of second language learners. Mature second language learners also tend to write out of mode when asked to write an exposition or argumentation. In two studies currently in progress at the University of British Columbia, many upper level high school students (Yau, study in progress) and adults (Sinclair, study in progress), when asked to write exposition or argument, wrote instead in the narrative mode. Yau asked three groups of high school students aged fifteen, seventeen and nineteen to write on an expository topic in English. She found that almost all the fifteen-year-olds and a majority of the seventeen-year-olds wrote instead in the narrative mode, but that few of the nineteen-year-olds did so. It seems that the advanced level students (i.e., the nineteen-year-olds), who had been studying English for several years, were able to cope with the cognitive demands of writing in the expository mode in a language not their own, but that lower level students (e.g., the fifteen-year-olds and many of the seventeen-year-olds) who had come more recently

to English language study, and for whom writing in English was consequently more difficult, coped with the cognitive overload of expository writing in a non-native language by reverting to a cognitively less demanding mode, namely, narrative. Yau, who has spent a number of years teaching both English and Chinese to students at all three levels in the same Hong Kong high school where the data were collected, states (personal conversation) that students at all three levels would be quite well able to write exposition or argument in Chinese. Thus their failure to write argumentation cannot be attributed to lack of familiarity with the mode. Similarly, the tendency for young writers in the present study to write in the narrative mode may have been partially a response to cognitive overload.

In summary, profiles for fifth and seventh graders on their use of the four sentence types examined were indistinguishable. The major difference between eleventh graders and younger students was that they used used significantly less reporting, i.e., narrative. A minor difference was the higher number of generalizations used by eleventh graders. The explanation for the difference in generalizing is that older students' greater cognitive development makes them better able to generalize. The explanation for the difference in use of the narrative mode is a product of interacting factors. It is suggested that young students lack a well developed schema for written persuasive discourse, partly because they have limited experience reading

and writing argumentation, and partly because considerable adaptation of the schema of oral argumentation is required for written argumentation. Secondly, for a variety of reasons, argumentation makes heavier cognitive demands on the writer (and, indeed, on the reader) than narrative writing does. It is suggested that, faced with a difficult cognitive task, young writers may tend to retreat to a mode of writing over which they have firmer control, namely, narrative.

A question for educators is whether such "retreating" indicates that students cannot write in the persuasive mode. There is some evidence to the contrary. Bereiter and Scardamalia and their colleagues have found that children aged ten and up were able to specify the main elements of the structure of argument (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1982), and that children in grades 4 and 6, after a brief training period of eight hours, were better able than untrained students to a. avoid content that did not contribute to their argument, and b. use statements which recognized the opposite point of view (Scardamalia & Paris, N.D.).

The fact that persuasive writing is difficult for young students is to be noted by educators. The energy required to compose argumentation may mean less energy devoted to other things. There is some evidence, for example, that spelling and mechanical errors may increase in persuasive writing as against narration (Aviva Freedman, personal conversation). However, its

difficulty does not mean that it should be avoided. Students from elementary grades through high school need to write in a wide variety of modes. Persuasive writing may be one of these modes. Children, after all, turn early to the task of oral persuasion. They understand well what it means to persuade. Alert teachers can, without too much difficulty, design persuasive assignments which entail writing for real purposes.

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Table 1

Grade 5 Compositions Written "Out-of-Mode"

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1. One day a red headed boy made a powerful sling shot with a long red elastic band and a sharp thin pebble. The mischief making boy's name was Rockey. He was going to have to pay the price. To top it off he threw sneezing powder in the air; and left the class sneezing for an hour and hitting Miss Brown with a sharp thin pebble. I got some blank white paper and started to write down tortures. Hang him, make him do a hundred page essay, strip in front of the class while the kids bring cameras and take pictures of him and send them to his relatives and mom and dad. Or even send them to the teachers and the principal and to top it off send it to Playgirl magazine. Or for art the kids would draw crazy pictures of him. Or even clean out the doggy doo at the town's kennels. But the list went on, and on, and on.

---

2. One day while our teacher was showing us how to do our math, a boy shot an elastic band at me and I happen to be in a committee that decides what kind of punishments the children should get for breaking the rules of the class. I thought that he should get garbage duty for two weeks because that would teach him not to shoot elastic bands any more and besides, it hurts. The teacher is in the committee too except we had a substitute that day.

   So I tried to convince her that my punishment would work, but she wouldn't hear of it. Finally I convinced her and the boy didn't shoot any more elastics. (At least not in school).

---

3. "Well, I myself think that he should be confined to the chalkboard to write 4000 lines of, 'I shall not shoot another elastic band'," I said to my teacher as we were arguing about punishment for the situation.

   The teacher, Miss Robbins, said, "I think that's a bit much, Dave. I think 50 lines is enough."

   "Maybe so," I said, "but he broke our biggest class rule. You even said that the number one rule was never to throw anything at anyone."

   "I still say 4000 lines is going overboard!"

   Miss Robbins tried reasoning with me, but I stuck with 4000 lines. Nothing - no, nothing - would change that!

   Finally, after staring at her for a long time, I said, "You picked me for leader of this group! Now, it's either 4000 lines or nothing!"

   "Okay, okay," Miss Robbins said, "but only 1000 a day."

   "Fine with me."

   Then she said, "Now that that's settled go out for your recess."

"I think the ideal punishment is for Peter to pick up all the garbage in the school field," I told Mrs. Bousquet. "No I don't think so." "But why? He broke the school rule. And the field is a big one, so it can't be it's not good enough. And it only takes about two hours if he doesn't fool around." "No it's not that either." "And he won't goof off." "Well all right. He'll start right after school." "Good." I was glad she agreed with me!

Table 2

Compositions Written Partially "Out-of-Mode"

1. It was one day and a substitute came in to our classroom and said that Mrs. Bousquet was sick and she was going to be away for the whole day. The substitute said we are goin to start reading so the boys and girls to out their reading books. Everyone in the classroom read a paragraph. It was Billy's turn to read and he didn't start reading and everybody was looking at Billy. The substitute walked over and was staring at him. Billy was using a sling shot and using that he was throwing paper around the room. It is a rule in our classroom and I think he should be punished like having a detention every day for a month and write 60 lines every recess and lunch. I think we should do it because it if important to convince him not to do it again. Just because there is a substitute doesn't mean that he can do whatever you want. Then I wrote it on a piece of paper and gave it to the teacher and she said if there is supposed to be a response I will give it to you tomorrow. (Grade 5)

2. The boy in the class started the whole thing. He was going to shoot an elastic at somebody with something in the elastic and wouldn't you know it, it was when they had a substitute teacher. It was also when a girl was writing something on the board and naturally he figured the teacher wasn't watching him but was watching the girl up at the blackboard. But fortunately the teacher was watching him instead. But then comes the hard part trying to decide what to do with the boy. I think he should have a detention after school cleaning the floor or else sitting on his hands. If he would have hit somebody with it, it could do a lot of damage. For instance it could hit him in the eye or other parts of his face. I think he should have detention for the rest of the week. I think he should because he did something he wasn't supposed to so if I were the teacher I would give him the detentions. (Grade 7)

3. As a committee member I choose the punishment as followed: Make him sit in the office and do his work, have more homework, and have him in an isolated room for a week every month after school for an hour. AFter all he did take his eraser and fling it across the room when it hit Amy in the head and caused her to get a bump. Then it bounced back, hit the teacher, bounced up, and hit the clock; which fell on the teacher. And the teacher's wig fell off! The eraser bounced and broke all the windows in the school! Also it bounced up and went in Mr. Stone's pants, then went down his pants leg, bounced up, went down Mrs. Smith's top, then Mrs. Smith had to put it on her desk. (Grade 5)

4. I think that we should give him a punishment in which he will not be able to partake physical education for a week and that means he shall not be able to participate in the upcoming track and field meet. The committee took everything in mind and made the decisi and if it was our real teacher we would have only gave him three days no P.E. s we gave him a week because we know he would not have did it if Mr. Smith was here. He was just taking advantage of the sub and he will get 500 lines from Mr. Smith when he gets back. One of the members said to sit you in a corner with a dunce cap on for the rest of the year and all work assigned to you would do for homework so you should consider yourself very fortunate. (Grade 7)

TABLE 3

Draft and Revision of a Seventh-grade Argument

VERSION 1

"I think the whole class should get to hit him with an elastic band." That was Gail's idea. Right now I'm in room 9 thinking of a punishment for Billy Jones. In our class we have a system where if a kid disobeys, our "crime committee" must find a punishment for him or her. So many ideas were floating around the room and here I am thinking for an appropriate punishment. Then suddenly it dawned on me. I put up my hand for about five minutes before I was noticed. "Mrs. Jones I think we should send Billy to work in a grade 2 class for a day" I started. "No I don't think so, what good would that do?" She tried to make me forget it but I wouldn't give up. "Mrs. Jones what age level do you think shooting elastics around the room is?" She answered me quickly with a "that's not the point" routine, but she's not going to get me to give up that easy. "Mrs. Jones if I got caught shooting elastics and my punishment was cleaning the board it wouldn't stop me." I thought I was putting up a good fight so far. "Well that just goes to show what kinda person you are but we are talking about Billy." I was fuming now someone who shoots elastics around like him wasn't gonna get off that easy if I could help it. "If we are gonna let everybody get off that easy then I don't want to be a part of the committee." I know that sounded kinda harsh but I didn't think you could let someone off that easy. All Mrs. Jones answered with was "I get your point and I will certainly think about it." I thought I deserved at least a maybe.

VERSION 3

Crime Committee

Mrs. Bernard and members of the crime committee, we are here to find a suitable punishment for those who deserve to be punished. I think I have a suitable punishment for those who have done something wrong. If they have done something that a grade 2 would do they should have to spend a day in a grade 2 room if that doesn't work grade 1 if not that kindergarten if that doesn't work they must be a juvenile delinquent on your hands. I feel that having to spend a day in a primary classroom would be more than enough of a punishment and that that person would not be a bother anymore. The embarrassment would probably be too much to be able to face those of a grade 2 room to have to be sent there again. I am very confident that this punishment will be suitable.

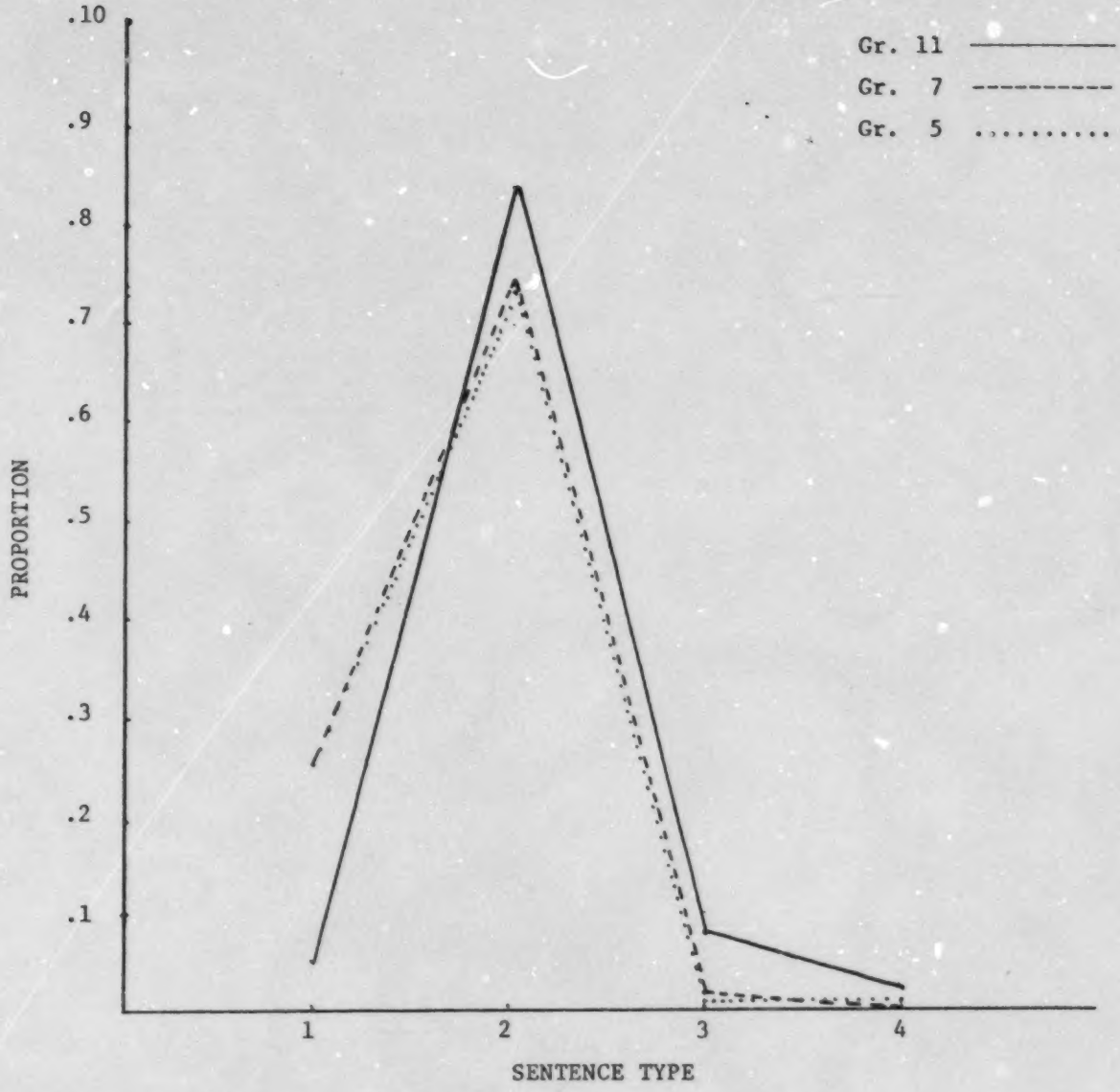

FIGURE 1

Proportion of Sentences in Each of Four Sentence-Types for Three Grade Levels